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The Best Medium for Relationships

by Corrie True

(English 1101)

I have one hundred and fifty-six friends. Well, that is what Facebook says. On Facebook, a “friend” is someone who can see anything one posts about his or her life. Some people “friend” everyone who wants to be a friend and some people only “friend” people they know. To a confirmed Facebook user, my number of friends might seem a little low, but if I were talking about real friendships, no one would believe me. I would probably only consider about fifteen people on that list to be my real friends, and the rest acquaintances or friends of friends. Some people say they do make real friends, people they have never met in person, through social media platforms, but these relationships are questionable. They might fulfill a person’s social needs, but they cannot replace and may even hinder face-to-face friendships.

In “How Digital Era is Damaging Our Relationships,” Hope Reese, a free-lance writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, argues that social media can be detrimental to people’s relationships. Citing Sherry Turkle, founder and director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Initiative on Technology and Self, Reese claims that “almost everything” (11) is at stake with frequent use of social media. Those who use it to avoid human interaction by seeking seclusion on their phones are negatively affected. On social media, emotions can be masked effortlessly, language subtlety is lost, and the sensitivity of the person on the other side of the computer can be forgotten. In contrast, face-to-face conversation builds intimacy, fosters creativity, and develops empathy, something far more difficult to achieve with online connections.

It is no surprise that people are participating in more and more online communication since the reward centers of the human brain light up as this quick communication is implemented. Besides, adds Reese, using Facebook helps to calm the innate fears of being unheard, bored, or lonely. However, this constant connection hurts other relationships by limiting the time for self-reflection and giving full attention to friends and family. As social media becomes more prevalent, users will become increasingly anxious and isolated, especially the younger generation who will actually engage less and less in face-to-face relationships. She sums up these warnings with the “plea to bring consciousness into the way we use our devices” (12). The problem is not the media itself, but rather how it is being used. An adult who is being introduced to social media will most likely consider it a useful tool for keeping up with friends or expanding his or her circle of influence. On the other hand, a teen who is still somewhat immature may deem it to be a replacement for or a good distraction from in-person social interaction. This incorrect assumption could lead to that adolescent developing substandard social skills and becoming more anxious in the world beyond his or her phone screen.

When I was a child, every day after school my friends and I played outside, swinging, sliding, making up games, and exploring. A few friends of mine went through phases of only wanting to watch television or play on the computer during playdates, but after a while their parents sent us outside to “go get some fresh air,” allowing us to disconnect and interact with each other. The difference between a smart phone and a television is that one must stay plugged into an electrical outlet, but the other can go anywhere. More and more often, inside and outside, I see five to twelve-year-olds who, while they are together, eventually huddle up to watch one kid play *Angry Birds* or *Mine Craft*. If they know me and do not have their own device, they ask if I have any games on my phone. It is not that children overall prefer the company of a device to a real person, but that it is hard to break away from the constant, easy stimulation and gratification which is keeping them from more

constructive play. Though adults may be subject to the same pull, they are better at self-limiting and monitoring than the typical seven-year old. A person raised with free rein on social media accounts and smartphones will not generally have the finesse and stamina for the roller coaster of a real-world relationship.

In “Digital ‘Friends’ No Substitute,” Jessica Reynolds also warns of the effects of social media on relationships. Though the number of “friends” on Facebook may be rising, the quality of friendships is often falling. Only a week ago, I was upset about the death of a fellow student. I told a friend about it on Facebook and she sent back a sad emoji and left the conversation. When I saw my sister later that day, she could tell that I was upset and asked me about it. She listened to me and even let me cry about it. She shared with me “Turn! Turn! Turn!” a song by *The Byrds* about everything having a time and a season. She shared the story of how it helped her through her friend’s death, and we cried together. Somehow being with my sister, who is also one of my best friends, was much more comforting than chatting with that friend online.

There are a few things social media cannot simulate: a touch, a hug, or a physical shoulder on which to cry. Those dependent on it may find themselves affection-starved physically and emotionally. “We end up glorifying the trivial” (Reynolds F4) while the essential and meaningful details of our lives are brushed under the rug. Citing Kory Floyd, a professor of communication at the University of Arizona and writer of *The Loneliness Cure: Six Strategies for Finding Real Connections in Your Life*, Reynolds writes, “we know the minute details of what we’re doing moment to moment in the day, but that comes at the expense of being able to invest in each other in longer-term and more intimate ways” (F4). The more communication is restrained, the more compassion and patience dwindle, and deep emotional connections with others fade.

When shielded by a screen, it is so easy to remain ungentle and invulnerable; it feels much safer emotionally than an in-person relationship. People can present the best versions of themselves which seems great to self-conscious teens who might fail to recognize that everyone else is doing the same thing. Consequently, as a 154-person study in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* found, “the more time people spent comparing themselves to others on Facebook, the more depressive symptoms they exhibited (Steers, et.al 723). It did not matter if they were comparing themselves to people they perceived as more or less successful than themselves, the same effect still occurred. In this, “Smartphones are the ultimate adult pacifier” (Reynolds F5) because they create an easy escape into the depths of the internet. This pacifier extends all the way to five-year olds who may have just given up on sucking their thumbs. There are so many social media platforms to choose from that any and every awkward or uncomfortable situation in a real life can be avoided by simply picking up a smart phone and scrolling through newsfeeds, dashboards, or stories.

Yet, despite the temptation, it is very important to spend tech-free time with loved ones according to clinical psychologist, Ben Michaelis who has written “Your Next Big Thing: Ten Small Steps to Get Moving and Get Healthy” (Reynolds F5), a guide to unplugging from the overuse of online friends. Face-to-face communication enables individuals to pick up on nuances, body language, expressions, and context which text just cannot replicate. His warning is not only about phones, but also about the technology which distracts people from fully focusing on each other. Social interaction is more than just nice; it is necessary to one’s well-being. Reynolds ends by adjuring smartphone social media users to “put your phone down” (F5) and to give and seek out more affection.

In short, a few close, in-person friends can be more valuable than thousands of connections online. Real-world friends have an advantage over online friends not only with the comfort their physical presence can give, but also with the vulnerability, both of which are hard to achieve through text. For this reason, children should be taught to value the friends they have right there in front of them before trying to socialize through technology. And adults, knowing better, should carefully use their time online and be cognizant of how much they rely on online relationships, letting friendships

slip away just because Facebook or texting is easier. Social media is a good thing when it helps one keep in touch with friends, but it is a detriment when it replaces those real people, real friends.

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